

Foreign languages no longer just for big kids

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ST. PETERSBURG, Florida (AP) -- Sandra Rosado is big on class participation. So when her fourth-graders had a hard time keeping quiet until it was their turn to answer, she didn't mind.

Until a few of them spoke in English.

"No ingles!" Rosado reminded her Spanish class at Perkins Elementary. No problem. At ages 9 and 10, the children spoke Spanish for the rest of the class, eagerly naming Central American capitals and vocabulary words from potatoes to pineapples.

"The goal is to create a love for language while they're young, while they're still risk takers in class," Rosado said. "Little by little, we give them the confidence."

Starting little is getting big in languages. Long considered a subject for college or high school, foreign language is becoming more popular in elementary schools, experts say.

Parents and teachers are often fueling this expansion in their schools, backed by research that shows young children have great capacity for learning languages. But the drive also comes out of a sense of national necessity, as big gaps in language skills have threatened the country's security and commercial competitiveness.

"There's a perception in this country that English is fine, English is enough to get by, and languages are only for the college-bound elite kids," said Marty Abbott, director of education at the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages. "That's what we're trying to overcome."

Schools are also facing unprecedented pressure under federal law to raise math and reading scores, and as a result, some are inadvertently pushing languages to the margins, warns a report by the National Association of State Boards of Education.

Starting young

Overall, charting the state of language programs in elementary schools isn't easy. The Education Department does not collect data on it. A Center for Applied Linguistics study in 1997 showed a decade of rising foreign language enrollment in elementary schools, but updated figures are not available yet. Still, those who track language trends say enrollment appears to be growing along with a national understanding of why starting young makes sense.

"There's something very special about the brain and mind during early life that makes it exactly ripe for developing language," said Susan Curtiss, a UCLA professor of linguistics.

With children in other nations often learning English, French or another

language along with their native one, Curtiss said the United States could move toward the norm by introducing languages early, "and not just games and songs a couple of times a week."

The government agrees. Foreign language should be encouraged for all students starting in early grades, according to a review headed by the Department of Defense and embraced by leaders of government, industry and academia.

In Pinellas County, Florida, daily Spanish lessons begin in kindergarten at Perkins Elementary, a coveted countywide magnet school for the arts and language.

By late last spring, first-grader Emma Couture had finished two years of Spanish, as teachers integrated the language into lessons on geography and science. Emma said she likes learning about new foods and countries, and talking in Spanish with her older sister, Hannah.

"She came home from her first day of class and said, 'I speak Spanish!' " said the girls' mother, Wilma Norton. "Both of my kids may be fluent by the time they finish middle school. I just think it's going to give them all kinds of opportunities."

Monetary commitment

Spanish remains the dominant foreign language in schools, reflecting in part a trend in U.S. demographics. Hispanics are now the country's largest minority, and the number of children who speak a language other than English at home has more than doubled since 2003. French, German and Chinese are among other languages offered, particularly in high schools. Studies have shown that children who begin learning a second language early in life gain a more native-sounding pronunciation, better overall grammar skills, and other benefits.

Casey Whaley, a high school senior in Pinellas County who began taking Spanish in kindergarten, said his language study has helped his English grammar and vocabulary. Spanish never seemed like an extra, but rather, he said, "It just sort of became a part of my life."

But adding language programs in elementary schools requires money, qualified teachers and instructional time, and advocates for other subjects are competing for the same resources.

In Pinellas County, most elementary schools don't offer a foreign language, although the district is pursuing expansions. Until language is a key part of how schools are evaluated, "it won't be a priority," said Jan Kucerik, supervisor of world languages for the district.

It is one at Perkins Elementary. In a first-grade class last spring, students learned sea animals in Spanish as the instructor used a shark puppet to engage her students. In another room, third-graders were challenged to craft spontaneous thoughts in Spanish, not just understand it.

And elsewhere in St. Petersburg, students at Campbell Park Elementary

shared a Spanish lesson with students at Melrose Elementary by videoconference. As first-graders from both schools watched each other on TV, they took turns answering math questions in Spanish. The model is one way the district hopes to expand language classes in every attendance zone.

Said Maria Schemel, a kindergarten teacher at Perkins: "We need a lifelong commitment to language. If we started math in eighth grade, we wouldn't be great at math, either."

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